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THE

PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE

OF THE

UNITARIAN CONTROVERSY.

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UNITARIAN CONTROVERSY.

As Christianity originally, so Unitarianism now, has to strive against ignorance, indifference, and scorn, in order to obtain, not a full reception, but a fair hearing. The discussion of its tenets is regarded by the great mass of the public on the one hand, and by men of education, literature, and intelligence, on the other, as merely a sectarian controversy; and therefore it is regarded with listlessness or with contempt. And if their view of it were correct, the feeling which they evince might perhaps be justified without much difficulty. The world owes little gratitude to theological acuteness, directed as it has usually been to the letter that killeth, rather than to the spirit that giveth life; and issuing, as it has usually done, in the fabrication of creeds, the alienation of hearts, and the rearing of some petty diversity of faith or forms, as the banner of a party, rather than in the practical advancement of those principles of devotion and benevolence by which God is honored, and mankind purified, exalted, and blessed. But I shall endeavour to show that this view of the Unitarian controversy is not correct; that it does not lay waste the intellect by metaphysical and critical trifling, nor desolate the heart by bigotry and bitterness; but that those who treat it as an affair of mere speculation, and those who

regard it as one of the common-place squabbles of sectarianism, and those who allow its importance only to misrepresent its character, and describe its results as injurious and dangerous, are alike mistaken.

It should be distinctly understood that they are not merely speculative points, by agreement in which our union is cemented, or to the dissemination of which our zeal is directed. Prove them to be such, and I should say, let us instantly disband ourselves, and consult our own peace and that of the world, by dismissing all such questions to their proper sphere, the libraries of the learned, and the studies of the idle and the curious. The justification of our union and our exertions is to be found, and can only be found, in the importance of our principles. The controversy we promote must be a good fight, to vindicate our waging it. I shall therefore aim to show that the Unitarian controversy tends to the liberation of the intellect, the expansion of the affections, and the better regulation of the conduct; that it tends to benefit man in head, heart, and life.

1. The Unitarian controversy is a warfare for the emancipation of the human understanding. We invite men to inquire into religious doctrines freely and fearlessly. They have too long been told that there are tenets which they must not question, unless they would endanger or forfeit the salvation of their souls. They have too long been enslaved by the apprehension of damnation for involuntary error. No one doubts that it is pernicious for investigation to be biassed or repressed by temporal considerations. When men dare not inquire, lest the results, honestly avowed, should involve the loss of gown, stall, or mitre, with the dignities and emoluments append-

ed thereto, the evil is generally recognised. And what is that evil? That men tamper with their consciences; that they sophisticate to themselves; that they hunt eagerly for proofs, and look away from objections; that their minds lose integrity and vigor as to other spheres of intellectual exertion; that they are false to the cause of truth, and through them its progress is impeded, and its triumphs are postponed. And is the case essentially different if the misguiding or repressing motive, the bribe and the threat, be drawn from a future world? The motive operates in the same direction; the difference is that in the latter case its force is far more crushing. Who can investigate calmly with such an interest at stake? The understanding ought not to be put in this position.

Look at the results of this system of spiritual intimidation. Compare theological literature with all other kinds of literature. How poor, and feeble, and petty, and barren, and word-catching, and narrow-minded, and unprogressive, is the appearance it presents! How few and far between are those angel-visits of genius which have irradiated, from time to time, the inferior regions of poetry, and politics, and science! And this in theology! which is in itself the noblest of all the regions of thought and feeling; which is the first of sciences, or rather which includes all sciences, which pervades them as God pervades the universe, and because God pervades the universe; which supplies their ultimate principles, and appropriates their discoveries, and links them together, like stars in a constellation, into a bright and harmonious, and powerful unity: theology, which appeals to the entire soul of man; not merely to the understanding, like science; nor to the imagination, like poetry; nor to the

active powers, like the useful arts; but which demands all faculties of thought, feeling, or exertion, and consecrates, and exalts, and blesses all, making the whole man the temple of God's spirit of wisdom, power, and love: theology, which instead of chilling, and enfeebling, and withering, the mind, should, and would if unperverted, by its unrivalled sublimity, and intense loveliness, and universal influence, "create a soul beneath the ribs of death," and into the dullest clod breathe the breath of inspiration! It is the proper business of theology to form, and cherish, and develope, and stimulate to their greatest achievements, the highest orders of human intellect. Instead of which, modern theology puts fetters on the soul at the very portals of the temple, and thinks God honored by the clanking of these mental chains. The writers who have most graced religion, in an intellectual view, have either been rebellious to the creed imposed on them, (Taylor denied original sin, Barrow opposed particular redemption,) or, like Milton, Locke, and Newton, their minds were trained in another school, and they brought to theology the vigor which had been nursed by physical, mental, or political science.

To impress a foreigner with an exalted, with a correct notion of what the human intellect had been, and had done, in these countries, who would think of selecting our theology? You might take for such a purpose, in a mass, our poets, our philosophers, our statesmen; they would each show that we are "sprung of earth's best blood, have titles manifold," but no one would dare to put forward our theology. This alone is sufficient to show that there is something essentially wrong. That wrong I take to be the prevalence of a theology which suppresses thought, by threatening mental error with the

penalty of eternal damnation. I know that this system appeals to the Scriptures. I also know that it is only supported by the perversion of the Scriptures. I could shew that whenever faith and salvation are connected there, either the faith is a moral quality, not an intellectual act ; or the salvation is only a prophecy of temporal deliverance, and not the promise of an eternal heaven. But this is beside my present purpose. I am only now urging the fact that revelation speaks to man through his reason ; and instead of limiting and quelling that reason by telling him that any of its honest conclusions can be a crime to be eternally punished, requires that every man judge what is said, and be, " fully persuaded in his own mind."

It is in proportion as the intellect is left thus free from the bias of hope or fear, that it flourishes in any department. Our noblest species of literature is our philosophy ; the second our poetry ; the third politics ; the last our theology. In each, truth is the object ; truth, in the first, as to the laws of matter and of mind ; in the second, truth of description, feeling, and character ; in the third, truth as to the tendencies of institutions and measures ; in the last, truth concerning God, duty, and futurity. The order of their excellence is precisely that of the degree of mental freedom, freedom from the prospect of reward or punishment as to particular conclusions, which exists in them respectively. There is little or nothing to bias in philosophy. In poetry there are the taste, the passions, and prejudices of the time, so far as these deviate from the common and permanent sympathies of humanity. In politics there are great temporal interests involved. And in religion there are terrors which few minds can resist, incessantly directed against denial, or even doubt, and therefore against investigation. Hence the order of

excellence reverses the order of importance. Hence the timidity, the narrowness, the barrenness of mind which we lament in theology.

We strive to break this benumbing spell. We would expose this terrific fallacy. We would raise the slave of creeds into the freeman of Christ. We demand, with him, "Why do ye not even of yourselves judge that which is right?" We sound the trumpet of the gospel, and cry "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." And would not the world be benefited if men could be made to think as freely and as vigorously in religion as they do in other concerns? Have not all great eras of improvement been characterized by a burst of intellectual activity? Was it not thus when Christianity roused the nations from the torpidity of their ancient skepticism and idolatry? Was it not thus when the Reformation was achieved? A pure, and rational, and liberal theology would exalt the character of any people to the proudest heights of intellectual dignity. This was the soul of the consecrated literature of Judea. Whether prophets and apostles were theologically inspired or not, their theology inspired them intellectually; it was from heaven, and raised their minds above the world; it gave them a sublimity unapproached by all other philosophers, moralists, and bards. Such should ever be the effect of genuine religion. Such never can be its influence till the bigotry and imposition are overthrown which denounce against what they call heresy and error the pains and penalties of eternity.

2. While one class of the questions at issue between us and those who call themselves Orthodox bears upon the emancipation of the intellect, there is another class

which bears not less strongly upon the feelings and affections, and the decision of which in our favor may be fairly termed the emancipation of the heart, its liberation from the spirit of bondage by that perfect love which casteth out fear, the fear which has torment. If I read aright the New Testament, love is the sum and substance of its religion; the essence of the devotion which it inspires, of the morality which it enjoins, and of the heaven which it promises. "God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." But men can never be thus in heart and soul united with their God and their fellow-creatures while they believe that supreme excellence includes such an attribute as vindictive justice — a justice which punishes not for purposes of kindness and correction, but merely on the principle of so much suffering for so much sin, that suffering itself producing more sin, and extending to all eternity: that the greatest sum of happiness, the universal good of his creatures, the greatest good of the whole, which necessarily includes the greatest good of the individual, was never contemplated by the Creator in his work of creation, nor will ever be realized by the operations of his providence and grace: that the Father is partial, infinitely partial, and out of the mass of conscious existence which he has produced selects a portion for goodness and happiness, abandoning the rest to remediless and endless anguish: that there are beings in the universe, intellectual, spiritual, mighty, and immortal beings, whose nature, agency, and destiny, is evil, unmixed evil: that man comes into the world corrupt to the heart's core, incapable of all good, and that except in those who undergo a certain change, and receive a certain faith, there neither is, nor has been, nor to eternity shall or can be, anything

whatever which morally is the proper object of complacence and love: that evil is final in the Divine plan, and that there is a region in which depravity and misery shall never cease to reign over millions, a region of blasphemies and vice, and foulness and hopelessness, and anguish unutterable.

Disguise and palliate and equivocate as advocates may for the purposes of controversy, these are the vital, practical doctrines of the faith which millions hold for Christianity. Whatever may be the amiable inconsistencies of individuals, it is impossible, while these tenets are held, for the spirit of Christian love to pervade the land. They may be checked in some degree by doctrines of a different character; they may also be checked by the best impulses of our calumniated nature; but they cannot be neutralized; they are too prominent in the system to which they belong, to be without a mighty influence over the heart; and that influence it is our bounden duty to struggle for the annihilation of. They are a source of slavish fear in religion, which is alike degrading to man who feels it, to the gospel which is represented as working by such base means, and to God who is its object. They are a source of censoriousness and bigotry, which bring upon society a countless train of evils, often perpetrating by word and deed atrocious injustice, and sowing the land with seeds of bitterness. They turn men aside from "doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with their God." They fill the world with contentions; and the deathbed even of their firmest votaries is often a scene of changing emotions, and melancholy apprehensions, and dark despondings, which it is fearful to contemplate.

Much must be done with men's minds before their hearts become right with God, or right with humanity.

Controversy must eradicate the prejudices which impede the growth of their affections. They must be brought into the light, to make them feel the warmth of genuine religion. Many a massy pile of false doctrine must be battered down before theology and morality can be reconstructed on the broad foundations which Christ has laid of universal love. On this principle alone, carried out into all its bearings, do we arrive at the full manifestation of the spirit of the gospel. This is the spirit of Christ, which makes and marks us his; in extending its influence we are advancing his kingdom; and in its final diffusion will the objects of his mission be accomplished.

3. A third class of questions at issue between us and others, relate to various views of repentance, and righteousness, and pardon, and conversion, and heaven; and involve to a large extent the activity which the believer is impelled to put forth, the motives by which he is to be influenced, and the course he should pursue, in this life of probation and preparation.

The greatest power which I can imagine religion to possess, and the most beneficial direction of that power, both for the individual and for the community, are when men conceive the dignity and happiness of an hereafter to consist in the full development of the intellectual, moral, and social principles of human nature, as constituted by its paternal Creator; when their heaven is a state of exalted attainment, of glowing affection, of beneficent activity, and all holding on an interminable progress through the ages of eternity; and when, as is the natural influence of such a notion as this, they advance towards future bliss by realizing here, with

all their ability and energy, that which they hope to become in the kingdom of heaven. The men who act on such principles have a constant motive to righteous exertion. They feel how the consequences of whatever they do extend themselves through death into the life to come, and to eternity. They must work while it is day. And their religion pervades all their pursuits. It sanctifies their scientific attainments, and their industrious labors. Whatever benefits their fellow-creatures, makes themselves more fit for heaven. Whatever purifies and exalts their own characters, is heaven commencing in them. Grace and glory are with them but different views of the same thing. The duty and the recompense, instead of a merely positive and arbitrary connexion, are inseparable and even identified. Death does not break the continuity of their moral being. Here and hereafter their existence is alike directed towards accomplishing the great end of their creation. For this purpose was the gospel proclaimed; for this Christ came, renewing in man the image of his Maker; for this was death abolished, and heaven and earth were united and reconciled, and the kingdom of God established, in all the universality of its spirit, its influences, and its promises.

But this light yet shines in the darkness. This great and glorious work is impeded not only in the world, but in the church, not only by the unbelieving and the profligate, but by the professors of Christianity itself. They first separate man's conversion, that is, his becoming a Christian, from his own exertions. They represent him as made so by a supernatural operation. They divide the effect from the cause, and deny the latter, while they desire the former. This is a vain attempt to honor the Deity. He is not less honored in the laws of the menta

and moral world than he is in the seeming interruption of those of the physical world. He is not less the great agent of the universe in nature than in miracle. There is no good done as to the religious feeling, but much evil as to moral activity. Religion is made passive in its origin. Man is initiated into Christianity by being told that he can do nothing. A false impression is produced, which tends to put him wrong through the whole of his course. He must not attempt by moral acts to generate in himself the spiritual life, but wait for its communication. There is no gradation for him to ascend. It is everything or nothing; and at this point that everything must be done for him, and not by him. What can be more calculated to leave the sinner in his sinfulness; to furnish self-justification to the impenitent; to dismay the timid; to puff up with spiritual pride the bold; and to turn all aside from solid, practical godliness, to the ever-varying and often deceptive emotions of their minds or their animal frames?

And then, when the spiritual life is supposed to be imparted, how is it to be manifested? Here, again, it is too common for them to separate what is called holiness from the real duties of man upon the earth. What constitutes the good and godly man, in the common estimation of religionists? It is notorious that the duties which become so simply because they are means, are placed in the very first rank. Heaven forbid that we should undervalue prayer and praise, both private and social; reading the Scriptures, hearing sermons; but their worth is in their use. It is our duty to form our characters to the devotion and benevolence which, rightly employed, they may be made so powerfully to promote in

us. Their obligation is secondary, not primary; it relates not so much to themselves as to their influences. It is a fearful mischief that they are so often raised, as habit or opinion raises wealth, from being pursued as means for an ulterior object, to being themselves the final object. They do not constitute the good man, the real Christian. How extensively have religionists been alienated from the great duties of social life! Engaged in praying and proselyting, how seldom they act upon the public mind and public institutions and conduct, so as to imbue them with the spirit of the gospel! How else could it be that even the progress of natural science should still often have to struggle with theological prejudices in Christian countries? That slavery should still exist in Christian countries? That wars should still be waged between Christian nations? That the administration of justice should still be so imperfect under Christian legislation? That many and some most grinding oppressions should still be practised in Christian communities? That universal education, whatever approximations are made, should still be so limited, both as to extent and as to the worth of the instruction, as it is in Christian countries? That to all great advances in the state of society there should still be such mighty obstacles as there are in Christian states? That institutions framed and conducted for the express object of elevating the moral, mental, and physical condition of the great mass of the people, should still be almost unknown in the arrangements of Christian nations?

In devotion to such aims as these, combined with the diligent cultivation of the personal and domestic virtues, is the Christian character exhibited. But these graft not well on the stock of popular systems; nor have they ever

born, nor seem they ever likely to bear, a harvest of such fruit. They are stigmatized as worldly aims; if they be, it is in the sense in which, among others, Christ came to save the world, and make his followers the salt of the earth. They are now the largest sphere for those good works without which faith is dead. Were it not the honest blunder of fanaticism, it would be the pitiful excuse of servility or selfishness, that should exclude them from the sphere of religion and morality. The presenee of the gospel in a country ought always to be visible by an atmosphere of knowledge, freedom, happiness, and improvement, ever spreading and brightening around it. Nothing can more degrade Christianity, than taking this class of actions from under its cognizance, because it belongs to business, and that, because it belongs to politics, and thus isolating religion from everything else, and stripping it bare of all its social strength and glory. Whatever benefits men in any of their relations, that is righteousness and true holiness.

Hence the mischief also of the further separation which religionists make between this world and the world to come. They seem to look for happiness rather in a perpetual act of worship, than in the continued developement of principles which here are the source of goodness and felicity. Their preparation for it is, therefore, in such exercises. Its hope does not act upon their social conduct. It is not a perpetual impulse to being good and doing good. We do not, and we cannot trace to their peculiar principles even the great efforts which from time to time are made and making for correcting the errors and evils of the past, and ameliorating the condition of mankind, and leading on the human race in its career of improvement. By mistaking heaven they

lose the glory of making earth the heaven into which it might gradually be transformed. O when will men awake from these dreams? What is sown shall be reaped; and happy they who go forth bearing precious seed, though it be with toil and tears, amid calumny and opposition and scorn, for the results shall be found after many days, and the good of earth may gladden them even in heaven.

Unitarians do well, then, and as enlightened, pious, and benevolent men should do, in associating for the promotion, by argument and persuasion, of religious views which will produce a better sptrit. They deserve well of Christendom; or they revert, and would induce all believers to revert, to the genuine truths of the gospel. They deserve well of their country; for they would restore to it that noblest prerogative and praise, of teaching the nations how to live. They deserve well of humanity; for they would see it created anew in the moral image of its Maker, and bring glory to God in the highest by peace on earth and good-will amongst men.

And in this delineation of social good and social duty, we trace also that of individual duty and good. The intelluctual, the moral, the active powers, these make up our nature; their diligent and proportionate cultivation is growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Cerist. With knowledge in the mind, love in the heart, and usefulness in the life, we must still expect to encounter the anathema of the bigot and the scorn of the worldling; but we may also anticipate that He, before whom we and they must appear, will recompense every endurance by declaring "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things."